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ABSTRACT

The unsatisfactory status of higher education in the United States has many explanations, such as the declining value of scholarship and academic ethos and the neglect of teaching obligations in favor of research duties. This paper posits another theory for the skepticism toward academic institutions: the general loss of confidence of the American people toward their government. This general feeling of distrust is described in terms of a disease in which the most influential institution, the government, becomes infected first, followed by similar infections to the other institutions. The relationships between the federal government and the academic institutions, between the public and the learning establishments, and the effects of the mass media are discussed, including problems of the professorate and the tension that has developed between teaching and research obligations. The paper concludes with a call to faculty to take advantage of the current change in the political climate and act toward changing the general atmosphere surrounding academia. (Contains 41 references.) (GLR)

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PUBLIC LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE US GOVERNMENT:

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Criticizing academia has had a long tradition in American history. Often, critics cite a variety of reasons responsible for the unsatisfactory state of the higher education institutions. Among these reasons are, the declining value of scholarship and academic ethos, the shift in undergraduate curriculum away from the Western tradition of civilizations, the neglect of teaching obligations in favor of research duties, and the significant growth of administrative staff. In this paper, I discuss the pertinence of another explanation that might account for the skepticism toward academic institutions. It is the general loss of confidence of the American people toward their government, a subject that was well documented by Lipset and Schneider (1983). This general feeling of distrust is described in terms of a disease. After the most influential institution, the government, is being infected, other parts of the body, i.e., other institutions, become contaminated too. The relationships between the federal government and the academic institutions, and between the public and the learning establishments are discussed, accompanied by a portrayal of the professoriate. The paper concludes with a call to faculty to take advantage of this current change in the political climate, and act toward changing the general atmosphere surrounding academia. Shifts toward greater appreciation of the academic establishments cannot occur in people's mind solely. They must be accompanied by changes from within.

PUBLIC LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE US GOVERNMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

During the past decade, we have witnessed a growing number of writers who have placed the American higher education system under siege (Bowen and Schuster 1986, Bloom 1987, Sykes 1988, 1990, Wilshire 1990, and Goodchild, 1991). Criticizing academia from within and without has had a long tradition (see, for example, Veblen 1918, Morrison 1923, Lowell 1934, Shyrock 1939, published on 1959, Wilson 1941, and Lazarsfeld & Thielens 1958). However, the current wave of criticism, which has attracted the attention of all strata in society, seems to gain a new pace at a very particular epoch.

Most critics of academia cite a variety of reasons contributing to the decline of American superiority in a number of scientific areas. Among these reasons are, the declining value of scholarship (Goodchild 1991:4), and academic ethos (Shils 1975), the professionalization of the university on the expense of providing general education (Wilshire 1990:59-95), the "betrayal of the American professor" (Huer 1991), the shift in undergraduate curriculum away from "the intellectual tradition of Western civilizations" (Sykes 1988:260, also Smith 1990), and the turning of faculty from teaching to research ("academic ratchet"), accompanied by a significant growth of administrative staff ("administrative lattice") (Massy and Wilger 1991).

Recently, the former president of Harvard University, Derek Bok, noted that upon leaving the twenty year position he held since 1971, he felt that "the public was really upset" about higher education (Bok 1992), although "there were no riots, no building occupations. There was much less orthodoxy," and "very little drug use or evidence of politicized decisions on campus" (ibid). As other scholars have indicated, the public seems to hold unfavorable attitudes toward higher education, mainly because of its fear that present academic institutions do not show a high commitment to educate students (Harshbarger 1989, Kerr 1990:15). To attract a prominent faculty member, Bok noted, "the bargaining chip is a reduced teaching load" (Bok 1992). If this statement typically portrays the bargaining negotiations at American universities, it is not surprising that the public has shown a decline in its confidence toward the genuine intention of the professoriate to contribute to society.

In this paper, I discuss the existence and implications of another explanation for the public's skepticism toward academic institutions. It is the general feeling of distrust that American people hold toward their government, a subject that was well documented in the book, "The Confidence Gap," co-authored by Lipset and Schneider (1987, first published in 1983). This general distrust feeling might shed some light on our understanding of the declining faith in the American higher

education institutions.

The Public Confidence in the Government

A decade ago, Hans Weiler wrote about the declining confidence of Americans in the public education system (1982). Relying on different sources of data (e.g., Gallup, NORC), he showed that there has been "an erosion of confidence in public schooling" (1982:5). This erosion, according to Weiler, reflected a wider phenomenon related to the general decline of confidence in "public authority", the state and its agencies. (The "state" refers to the society as an entity at all levels: national, state or local.)

A year later, Lipset and Schneider co-authored their book about the confidence gap, which was largely based on public opinion surveys (198?). The empirical data led the authors to conclude that there has been a continuous decline in the public confidence toward the government and its institutions since the 1960s, focusing mainly on the areas of business, labor, and politics. The indicator of level of confidence in the government seems to operate as a snowball sprinting down the hill, affected by a deteriorating state of the economy. Hence, Lipset and Schneider assert that "economic improvements should increase faith in institutions. And, of course, they do" (1987:419). An examination of public trust during the past decade revealed that

> The economic recovery of the mid-1980s did last longer than most, and there were no major political scandals or foreign policy setbacks to counteract it. Still, as of 1986 there had not been enough time to reverse a twenty-year downturn in public trust. And already by 1986 the economic recovery had begun to stall as the trade and budget deficits continued to worsen. (ibid, p. 436).

The loss of confidence is described in terms of a "ripple effect" (ibid). First, the government, the most influential institution in society, confronts the decline in public's faith. Then, other institutions, such as education and science, become affected. Another metaphor that can be used in this context is the one of a disease which embodies the negative connotation of the phenomenon. After the first organ is being infected, other parts of the body become contaminated. The more seriously the original organ is perceived ill, the more the chances of the ailment to spread to other parts of the body.

Lipset and Schneider also acknowledge the role of the media in spreading the general hostile atmosphere toward the government and its institutions. Often, the media underscores the prevalence of scandals (e.g., the indirect costs issue), thus raises doubts in the public mind regarding the accountability of academic institutions in general. As the public witnesses the growing concern of its political leaders to assure American prominence in scientific and technological arenas, it tends to denounce the educational institutions as responsible for losing the edge. Indeed, a recent Gallup Poll found out that most Americans were not satisfied with the performance of U.S. system of public

education in comparison with the system prevalent in other Western countries and Japan (May 1991, p.18. See, also, The American Perspective 1992:85, for the declining trend in Americans' confidence in public schools during the past fifteen years).

The public loss of faith in private and public institutions was first documented in the mid 1930s, during the Great Depression. For the next thirty years, most of the Americans credited their society and its political constituencies with greater respect. However, the turbulent years of the mid 60s resulted in a steady decline in the American public's trust of its leadership and the political system. Since then, the government and its institutions have not retained the degree of confidence they had lost since 1965, although between 1983 and 1986, public trust in government did improve.

As for the past year, polls have shown "exceptionally steep drops in a series of measures of political sentiment, economic concern, and confidence in overall national direction." (Ladd 1992, p.3). In addition, a nationwide survey of 5,000 households, conducted on Feb. 1992 by the Conference Board, a business research organization based in New York, revealed that the level of consumer confidence hit a seventeen year low. It dropped 3.9 points from its already low level of January 1992, to 46.3. (Harper 1992, p.A2). This finding suggests the public loses

confidence not only in the nation's economy, but also in the government and the other institutions.

The Federal Government-Higher Education Relationship

In recent years, the federal government has been playing an active role in its relation with academic institutions. Various federal agencies have voiced some concerns regarding the credibility of higher education institutions of all kinds, and have launched on-campus investigations. These actions are aimed to detect misuses of federal research money by universities. But, in some occasions, it seems that the federal government has provoked an unprecedented action which carried a "boomerang" effect. Though the original goal of the probes was to safeguard the use of tax-payers' money, the investigations have, unfortunately, caused a considerable detriment to the parties involved.

The intensive on-campus investigations, carried out by governmental auditors, have called into question the accountability and loyalty of American academic institutions. Following the suspicious raised by governmental representatives, the general public has developed a skeptical attitude toward academia, questioning the effectiveness and efficiency of the academic infra-structure to fulfill its missions. Thus, the offensive strategy employed by several governmental officials might have induced the current wave of criticism toward academia.

This disapproving attitude has already started to take its toll, by causing the public to undermine its faith in educational institutions. However, the long-term implications of such a trend are yet to be unveiled.

One of the significant short term effects of these actions has been the necessity to reallocate resources, facilitate and coordinate the investigations. During a time of austerity, when the federal government has already reduced its support for research and development (National Science Board 1992), this reallocation of resources brings about new constraints which may ruin American vantage ground in certain scientific areas. The federal agencies seem to change the nature of their partnership with the academic institutions. They demand a greater role in running these enterprises, and placing auditors of the federal agencies on campus is one instance of such intervention. These gatekeepers proclaim to safeguard the tax-payers money by striving to guarantee adequate returns for the research funding. Consider, for example, the publicity given to procurement for which some universities have billed the federal government as indirect costs, also known as overhead charges. Many of the expenditures claimed by the institutions were associated with research funded by the federal government. But, because of frequent unbridged disagreements between the parties on numerous issues, the controversy has become offensive, and has stimulated the public's hostile attitude toward academia.

It is still premature to assess the implications of the governmental inquiries on the current and future operation of the universities. Undoubtedly, there are other variables which may predict the level of trust and support in American higher education institutions. Among these factors are: the individuals' level of prosperity, the loyalty of alumni to their schools, and the existing laws and regulations regarding tax-exemptions for donations and contributions. At this point of time, it seems more reliable to propose some lines of thoughts and propositions regarding this subject, rather than test actual hypotheses.

The Public View of Higher Education

It is, probably, the ultimate wish of every human being to see the political system functioning as a spick-and-span machine, built upon a healthy economic infra-structure. Therefore, when this greased-machine starts to squeak, accusations toward other institutions begin to rise. Within the education realm, higher education has been a convenient scapegoat for many maladies of society, including illiteracy, immorality, growing rate of crime, and economic recession. Decidedly, one could claim that every aspect of our life is affected by academic institutions, where new generations are nourished and socialized to become the future mentors, teachers, educators and leaders of the people. But, are we, seriously, considering the costs of adopting such a belligerent strategy, which may, eventually, lead to a dead end?

Can this responsibility for society's ailments fall primarily on one sector's shoulders, the academia?

Apparently, there is a need for greater collaboration among the parties responsible for healing the country's sores. A surgery in situ will cure only the single organ involved, but will not remedy the whole body. Thus, solving the problems facing higher education institutions today will not cure the country's other illnesses. Nevertheless, gaining public trust in the American academic institutions, might abet in retaining the country's leading role in certain scientific and technological areas. Researchers and scientists in academia are constantly involved in the process of creating new knowledge, but only portion of this good is diffused in a way which is comprehensible and accessible to the public at large. Exposure of the lay people to the knowledge produced at the "ivory towers" might result in greater acknowledgement and credit of these settings.

To increase the society knowledge of the research and scholarly work of the professoriate, members of the scientific community need to become more accessible. Accessibility to the people at large can be attained through several channels, such as writing articles for popular magazines and newspapers, publishing books (e.g., the best-selling book by the brilliant physicist, Stephen W. Hawking 1988), lecturing to members of the community, and making more frequent appearances in the media networks. To

enhance the interaction between academic scholars and the public, the scientific community would have to review the present reward system, so academicians would feel more attracted to reach out the public. The current reward system might not correspond to the expectations of more extensive interaction with the environment, which includes other non-profit organizations, profit enterprises, the media, and the political constituencies.

Another reason that might account for the public declining confidence in academic institutions refers to the faculty preoccupations with "property rights" (Massy and Wilger 1991:14), or "citizenship" issues (Rosovsky 1991). These terms refer to the enactment of norms and beliefs, shared by faculty, about their disciplinary profession. The eternal debate about the "right" or "expected" teaching load is only one example of how faculty is divided on its obligations to the clientele. At times, when resources become scarce, such polemic becomes even more furious, stimulating the general public to express reservations toward the people in charge of this arena.

A Portrait of the Professoriate

In a recent symposium about the future of research universities, the President of Princeton University described the somber state of faculty today. He described the frustrated feeling of faculty, coping with charges of "hopes and aspirations questioned," followed by uncertain future regarding research funding (Shapiro

1992:3). "All university based scholars believe they are facing increased difficulty in mobilizing adequate support" (ibid). This observation seems to capture accurately the declining assurance of faculty in their role as scholars. The academic freedom, a blank check they were granted long ago, has been questioned lately, and there are signs suggesting that the (almost) unlimited academic freedom may lose its ground, and become "somehow" limited. Funding sources, including the federal government agencies, have attached more strings to the support, (e.g., applying ret-tape policy, and requiring delay in publication of research findings), as resources have become more scarce, causing sturdy competition among academic researchers.

From an organizational viewpoint, faculty who are currently involved in conducting scientific research face greater uncertainties regarding the monetary support. This reality places them at a higher degree of vulnerability, compared with their state ten or twenty years ago. During the past decade, federal and state agencies have posed major budgetary restrictions on supporting various kinds of research activities, hence, forcing academic and administrative staff to look for alternative sources of finance. These changing conditions prompted many faculty members to divert portion of their time from teaching to research, thus hurting their commitment to teaching undergraduate and graduate students. The tension between teaching and research obligations is most salient during periods of austerity,

aggravating the feelings of uncertainty among professors.

Academic scholars of the 1990s are called to respond to diverse problems posed by the society, and the demand for an immediate cure is high. Remedy is sought for any type of malady. As a result, faculty members are expected to deal with additional responsibilities, some of which do not necessarily relate to their duties as teachers or researchers in academic institutions. In the process of prioritizing their different tasks, the professors become uncertain about the desired goals they should strive to accomplish in academia, and the means to achieve them.

Academicians may query how well they serve the society, and whether they fully comply with measures of morale and integrity in their academic work. Sometimes, faculty may not be so clear as to the appropriate way they should adopt to meet the changing needs of the society, if it all. It seems that the more the society is unsatisfied with the current situation of the government and its institutions, the greater the bewilderment faced by faculty and policy-makers regarding their mission and roles in academic institutions in the 21st century.

The debate about the mission of education has received renewed attention in recent years. Within academia, leading professors have stressed the importance of reviving the "golden age" of higher education. Ironically, there has not been a general

consensus regarding the when, if ever, this golden era occurred (Bok 1982a, 1982b, 1986, 1990; Kennedy 1985, 1987, 1989a, 1989b; Shapiro 1990, 1991). Teaching undergraduate students seems to receive most attention among critics, as America strives to win the battle against its competitors, the West European countries and Japan. However, examining faculty role as researchers, interacting with for-profit organizations, has also been addressed, especially within the literature of university-industry research relationships (see, for example, Fairweather 1988).

The everlasting discussions about the importance of education to America future generations have exceeded the circles of academicians and commentators. During the political campaign of 1988, George Bush declared that providing American kids with better education was one of his main goals, a statement for which the phrase "The Education President" was coined to describe him. Whether there has been a significant change in the state of education in the U.S. since then, is another topic that will not be addressed in the frame of this article. It is evident that education has always been in the heart of everyone in the country, a fact that has caused academicians in institutions of higher learning to be constantly under siege.

It is interesting to look at how members of the scientific community view and evaluate their roles and responsibilities.

The general public may have been surprised when findings of a study, conducted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, were first published (AAAS, 1992). The results revealed that about one-fourth (27%) of the 469 respondents, AAAS members associated with the university, industry/business, and hospital/medical schools (37%, 17% and 17% respectively), "have encountered or witnessed research which they suspected to be fabricated, falsified or plagiarized" (AAAS 1992, no page; authors' emphasis). Though the authors describe a few shortcomings of the study, (e.g., a response rate of 31% that could imply a non-response bias, and a self-selection bias common to mailed questionnaires), there is enough qualitative evidence to suggest that the academic morale is at risk.

Among the interesting results of the study were the following findings: Thirty-seven percent of the respondents (N=169) thought that the frequency of fraud and misconduct over the past 10 years have increased, while 44% indicated it stayed the same. Only two percent of the respondents thought the number of such incidents decreased over that period of time. It should be noted that "scientific fraud and misconduct" referred "only to fabrication, falsification or plagiarism which may occur in a laboratory or research institution when proposing, conducting or reporting research" (AAAS 1992: Member Opinion Poll, authors' emphasis). About half (54%) of the respondents "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed to the statement that "universities are lax in

their investigation of fraud and misconduct cases." This belief, according to the report, was mostly shared by those who suspected untruthful action.

One of the interesting findings of the study was the relative high number of respondents (170, 36%) who enclosed editorial comments about issues of scientific ethics and responsibility. The report provides a sample of such comments, which includes the following: "As times get tougher, scientists, will, as a group, inadvertently cut corners to make ends meet. And if this means 'fudging' or 'jostling' some data, so be it." (AAAS 1992, p. 1 of "Selected Verbatim Comments from Members"); "What the press dealt with are flagrant cases and, I suspect, only the tip of the iceberg. I think there is a lot more scientific misconduct that we are willing to admit..." (p. 3, ibid); "The way we do science is flawed. The pressure of 'publish or perish' can lead otherwise ethical people to behave badly" (p.9, ibid); "Congressional involvement indicates that we are not doing an adequate job of monitoring ourselves" (p. 12, ibid), since it "increases the cost and decreases the efficiency of science, and has the effect of politicizing science and academics--infringing on freedom of inquiry." (p. 13, ibid).

Although the respondents differed greatly among themselves with regard to who should be in charge to control the research conducted within academic institutions, they all shared the

concern for self-examination. The AAAS members who responded to this survey expressed discontent with the current state of the scientific ethics and responsibility prevailed in their community. And even if these views do not accurately represent most members of the scientific community, they certainly do send a warning signal to those who fund academic research, and to the people who carry it out.

Epilogue

My main goal in writing this paper was to argue that the criticism with which universities are called to cope today can be partially explained by the general skepticism of the public toward the government. It is true that other institutions have also suffered from loss of public confidence, including the health-care and the religious and denomination establishments. Nevertheless, in this specific case, company in misery does not lighten. As long as the voices questioning the quality of American academic institutions keep rising, everyone in academia will have to face the question, "whether our universities are doing all that they can and should to help America surmount the obstacles that threaten to sap our economic strength and blight the lives of millions of our people." (Bok, 1990:6).

A shift toward greater appreciation of higher education cannot occur in people's mind only. Changes must come from within. Therefore, members of academia are encouraged to take a step

forward and bring about a change in the current wave of discontent and frustration toward American colleges and universities. The current political climate, which is still at a transition stage, is a unique opportunity to act toward shaping the future of these establishments.

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